

August 5, 1991

**THE CLEVELAND MUSEUM OF ART PRESENTS DRAWINGS BY GUERCINO;
COMPLEMENTARY SHOW EXPLORES TRENDS IN ITALIAN DRAWING 1550-1650
August 27 - October 13**

In celebration of the 400th anniversary of the artist's birth, The Cleveland Museum of Art presents **Guercino, Master Draftsman: Works from North American Collections**, a major exhibition of more than eighty rarely seen drawings by Giovanni Francesco Barbieri (1591-1666), known as Il Guercino ("The Squinter"). The exhibition, organized by the Harvard University Art Museums and selected from collections in United States and Canada by Dr. David Stone of the University of Delaware, completes its tour at the Cleveland Museum after stops at Harvard's Sackler Museum and the National Gallery of Canada. The works come from nearly 50 sources including the Pierpont Morgan Library, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, the National Gallery of Canada, the Art Museum at Princeton University, and other major collections, as well as from the Cleveland Museum; well over half of these drawings have never before been published or publicly exhibited.

Guercino was baptized on February 8, 1591, in the small town of Cento, near Bologna in northern Italy. His parents sent him off to begin learning how to paint by the time he was nine, and thereafter he spent much time practicing on his own. In 1607, when Guercino was sixteen, he was sent to the studio of the Centese artist Benedetto Gennari, Senior (1563-1610); as yet unsubstantiated local legend has it that after only a year as an assistant, Guercino was a full collaborator with Gennari on numerous projects in Cento. Meanwhile, in nearby Bologna, a revolution of sorts had been going on: Ludovico Carracci (1555-1619) and his cousins of the same surname, the brothers Annibale (1560-1609) and Agostino (1557-1602), had founded the Carracci Academy in the early 1580's, intending to replace what they considered the worn-out and artificial style of Renaissance Mannerist abstraction with a more naturalistic, emotionally charged approach—effectively defining the Baroque style. The Baroque officially appeared in provincial Cento during the

year Guercino was born, 1591, in the form of a Ludovico Carracci altarpiece, *The Holy Family with St. Francis, Two Angels and Donors*. As Guercino matured, he took the style of Ludovico's altarpiece as his point of departure; though Guercino apparently never studied at the Carracci Academy, the indelible Carracci influence is obvious in his aesthetic concerns and method.

Most evident in this exhibition, besides the naturalistic, expressive style Guercino developed after the Carracci example, is the artist's adoption of the innovative Carracci curriculum of drawing and design, a method which had become well-established in northern Italy. Fortunately for present-day collectors, the new method placed great emphasis on draftsmanship—working from the live nude model, and preparing countless composition and figure studies, genre sketches, landscapes, and caricatures. Guercino, who already loved drawing for its own sake, embraced the approach wholeheartedly. Due in part to the very large number of drawings he originally produced, quite a few beautiful examples of the artist's works on paper survive today.

This exhibition traces Guercino's career through his drawings, from his early years in Cento, to a stint in Bologna, beginning in 1617, under the patronage of Cardinal Ludovisi, Archbishop of the city (and soon to be Pope Gregory XV), through his most celebrated period as a painter between 1621 and 1623 in the service of Pope Gregory in Rome, and back to Cento until in 1642 Guercino moved his studio again to Bologna, where he succeeded the recently deceased Carracci follower Guido Reni as the city's leading painter, and prospered there for the rest of his life.

One of the earliest works in the exhibition, *Venus and Cupid in a Chariot*, from the Cleveland Museum, represents a breakthrough for the artist and anticipates the dynamic High Baroque style in Italy. The strong diagonal composition and delicate modulation of light and shadow create a forceful impression of motion through clouds and sun. Venus herself is no abstract, idealized vision of a goddess, but a realistic portrayal of a vital, athletic woman with bony knees—practically a human being. The energetic design and unstylized figure renderings put this picture a long way from the Mannerist works that preceded it, and even place it a step past the Carracci in terms of clear-eyed immediacy. The drawing was long dated on stylistic grounds to the period in Rome, around 1621; the tiny thumbnail sketch of Diana at the lower edge, however, suggests the work to be a preparatory drawing for one of Guercino's first important commissions in Cento, the decoration of several rooms in Casa Pannini, which he undertook between 1615 and 1618.

Jacob Blessing the Sons of Joseph was commissioned in 1620 for the Papal Legate of Ferrara. This preparatory study for that work was probably the first of Guercino's attempts at treating the theme, as the compositions of other preparatory drawings and of the final painting show the scene in reverse of this view. Exhibition organizer Stone calls this drawing from the Art Institute of Chicago "one of the most moving, Rembrandtesque inventions ever made by Guercino," calling attention to the interplay between the figures, as Joseph tries to prevent his blind father Jacob from accidentally conferring the right-hand blessing, usually reserved for the eldest son, upon the younger Ephraim. The arms of the older figures are drawn in multiple positions and with lines implying active movement, the right hand of Jacob descending rapidly toward the wrong boy's head, as Joseph lunges to arrest his father's gesture. The two boys, immobile, kneel in anticipation.

Another of Guercino's biblical treatments, the 1641 painting *Saint Jerome and the Angel*, inspired a Robert Browning poem ("The Guardian Angel," 1885); this drawing from The University of Iowa Museum of Art, a 1640 study for the painting, is noteworthy in showing the artist's movement toward designing his compositions with greater planarity, toward using more geometric forms and abstract linear treatments. As an example of Guercino's virtuosic use of contrasting expressive line styles to energize a single composition, the upraised arm of the youthful angel is rendered with a single sweeping gestural stroke, full of directed energy, while Saint Jerome's bent-in elderly arm is defined with short, uneven marks. The composition as a whole, compared to earlier works, is representative of the artist's shift toward his later, more angular style of drawing.

Though most of his commissions were for paintings on biblical themes, much of Guercino's graphic output was given to less lofty subjects. Landscape, in particular, seemed to offer him great delight, and he created landscape drawings throughout his career, though, since he generally conceived them as works in their own rights and had no official commissions in writing, it is very difficult to put accurate dates on many of these. A particularly beautiful drawing is *Landscape with a Volcano*, from the Pierpont Morgan Library. The scene, which may have been based on prints or drawings of Mt. Vesuvius (since there is no evidence Guercino ever visited Naples), is rendered in almost Chinese fashion, with spare use of brush and wash, and, in this rare case, no pen whatsoever. The subtle economy with which the scene is depicted places the drawing with the best of Rembrandt and Claude Lorrain.

Aficionados of caricature especially admire Guercino's drawings. It is generally agreed that the Carracci school more or less invented the genre and encouraged their students to incorporate the exaggerations of caricature into their drawing exercises as a way of mastering a personal style. Guercino was an avid student of physiognomies and often straightforwardly rendered the visages of men and women with strange diseases and deformities, the Philadelphia Museum of Art's *Caricature of an Emaciated Man* being a prime example. He also, as is evident in the group of caricatures from the Art Museum of Princeton University, chose to exaggerate on occasion, and was able to find striking similarities between humans and their cousins in the barnyard.

Often more sympathetic than his caricatures are Guercino's scenes from everyday life. *Beggar Holding a Broken Jug*, a sketch in oiled black chalk from the Pierpont Morgan Library, shows the artist's genuine respect for poor folk: he views the figure with neither pity nor satirical distance. Since such drawings were never made in preparation for bigger works, their great number suggests that the artist created them primarily for his own pleasure.

Indeed, as Dr. Stone puts it, "He lived to draw ... No other artist of the period made so many sheets for his own delight and the enjoyment of others. Guercino was a true pioneer in treating drawings as independent works of art." This exhibition would not be possible had not the artist placed so high a value on drawings, both as essential elements in the design and execution of large oils and as worthy creative exercises in themselves. Long considered one of the Baroque era's most important painters, Guercino leaves perhaps an even more impressive legacy on paper, securing his place as one of the greatest draftsmen in the history of Western art.

Recent advances in Guercino scholarship now make it possible to connect many undated drawings with documented paintings and to relate groups of drawings to each other. The fully illustrated catalogue, written by Dr. Stone and printed in Italy, makes many of these connections in detail and includes excellent reproductions of the drawings. The exhibition is made possible, in part, by support from the National Endowment for the Arts.

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The Cleveland Museum's companion exhibition, **Concept, Dogma, and Feeling: Italian Drawings 1550-1650**, which runs concurrently, draws upon the Cleveland collection to present a sense of the context in which Guercino's style developed. Works from the Mannerist tradition of the late Renais-

sance, such as the 1590's *Study for the Transfiguration* by Milanese artist Camillo Procaccini (1574-1625) typify the aesthetic background against which the Baroque style emerged.

As that style emerged over subsequent decades, it split between two approaches: a naturalist one, as exemplified by Guercino and others from the Bologna region, and a considerably larger Classicist movement, represented here by a number of sheets, including the work of a well-known Roman contemporary of Guercino, Pietro Berettini da Cortona (1596-1669). *The Idolatry of Solomon*, a finished modello for a fresco (the artist's first major commission), departs from the Mannerist tradition in its realistic rendering of the subject and in the strong narrative of the scene; compared to Guercino's expressive, dynamic attack, the use of line is quite restrained and the balanced, solid placement of the immobile figures creates a pleasingly ordered, relatively static composition. A number of Carracci selections (along with the works of Guercino) represent the more earthy, realist tendencies of the Bolognese contingent, whose subjects ranged more widely than those of the Classicists, venturing into caricature and even coarse satire.

As a group, the 50 drawings that make up this 100-year survey of Italian drawing reveal an intriguing series of transformations as the late Renaissance Mannerist style matured and spawned a number of distinct reactions against tradition. These reactions in turn developed to give rise to the flamboyant High Baroque style, most generally distinguished in painting by dazzling, often illusionistic compositions peopled by realistic figures in dynamic action. These drawings, especially seen with those of Guercino, provide a fascinating overview of the diverse influences and aesthetic approaches that coalesced into the Italian Baroque style. This exhibition was organized by Michael Miller, Assistant Curator of Prints and Drawings.

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